

## PUT ASUNDER: PENNSYLVANIANS' ATTITUDES TOWARD CIVIL UNIONS AND GAY MARRIAGE

by  
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No social issue has been more discussed or contentious in recent months than the debate over gay marriage and civil unions. When the Massachusetts Supreme Court ordered the state to recognize gay and lesbian marriages and the city of San Francisco began issuing marriage licenses to same sex partners, the fuel for a national debate had been stoked.

Given the primacy of the debate over gay marriage and its likely importance in this year's presidential race, two questions about gay marriage and civil unions were included in the February Keystone Poll. The responses to both questions reveal a citizenry that is closely divided on allowing civil unions and on supporting a constitutional amendment that defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman.

The results of the Keystone Poll also show that the distribution of the attitudes of Pennsylvanians on gay marriage is very similar to the distribution of opinion in the nation as a whole. As Table 1 shows, the proportion of Pennsylvanians who favor civil unions is the same as the proportion of US residents who favor civil unions. The proportion that favor a constitutional amendment that defines marriage as being between a man and a woman is also very similar.

In short, the deep division that characterizes the United States on the issues of civil unions and gay marriage is also evident in Pennsylvania.

**Table 1 Pennsylvanians' Attitudes toward Civil Unions and a Constitutional Amendment**

	Favor (US)	Oppose (US)
Would you favor or oppose a state law that would allow homosexual couples to legally form civil unions, giving them some of the legal rights of married couples?	42% (42%)*	50% (49%)*
Would you favor or oppose a state constitutional amendment that would define marriage as being between a man and a woman, thus barring marriages between gay and lesbian couples?	49% (53%)†	43% (44%)†

\* Source: National Public Radio Survey, December 2003

† Source: Gallup Poll, February 2004

Although the data indicate that Pennsylvanians are closely divided on these issues, we do find a number of important subgroup differences related to how people respond (see Table 2). Regionally, support for civil unions has majority support only in Philadelphia and Southeastern Pennsylvania. Residents in other regions of the state oppose civil unions, and those in the Northwest and Allegheny County are particularly strong in their opposition to such laws. A respondent's age is also related to support for civil unions—which is highest among those under 34 and generally declines with increased age. The civil union issue has decidedly partisan overtones. Republicans tend strongly to oppose civil unions while a majority of Democrats and Independents support them. But the most compelling differences in attitudes about civil unions relate to religious preference, particularly in the relationship respondents have to religious fundamentalism. Two in three respondents with strong fundamentalist religious beliefs strongly oppose civil unions. Respondents who are less likely to say they hold fundamentalist beliefs indicate more support for a state civil union law.

**Table 2 Would you favor or oppose a state law that would allow homosexual couples to legally form civil unions, giving them some of the legal rights of married couples?**

	Strongly favor	Somewhat favor	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose	Don't know
<b>Region</b>					
Philadelphia	29%	34%	2%	29%	5%
Northeast	20%	26%	9%	36%	9%
Allegheny	8%	17%	11%	58%	6%
Southwest	20%	22%	11%	32%	15%
Northwest	15%	19%	6%	56%	4%
Central	22%	17%	11%	44%	7%
Southeast	28%	25%	14%	26%	8%
<b>Party Registration</b>					
Republican	9%	24%	8%	51%	9%
Democrat	33%	18%	10%	33%	7%
Independent	31%	18%	8%	35%	8%
Other	38%	13%	13%	25%	13%
<b>Fundamentalism</b>					
Less Fundamental	24%	23%	12%	33%	8%
Most Fundamental	10%	15%	4%	63%	8%
<b>Age</b>					
18-24	42%	28%	7%	17%	7%
25-34	26%	30%	13%	26%	5%
35-44	19%	24%	13%	37%	8%
45-54	15%	16%	14%	46%	9%
55-64	21%	10%	9%	52%	9%
Over 65	14%	18%	8%	54%	7%

There are, as well, important demographic differences in terms of support for a state constitutional amendment defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman, as shown in Table 3. Majorities in Allegheny County, the Northwest, and Central Pennsylvania favor a constitutional amendment. Also, those over 35 favor an amendment, but those under 35 do not. A majority of Democrats and Independents are against a constitutional amendment, but a majority of Republicans favor one. Finally, those with very strong fundamentalist beliefs think the state should adopt a marriage-defining state constitutional amendment.

**Table 3 Would you favor or oppose a constitutional amendment that would define marriage as being between a man and a woman, thus barring marriages between gay and lesbian couples?**

	Strongly favor	Somewhat favor	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose	Don't know
<b>Region</b>					
Philadelphia	25%	5%	28%	40%	3%
Northeast	34%	6%	21%	28%	11%
Allegheny	49%	22%	11%	16%	3%
Southwest	32%	6%	17%	30%	15%
Northwest	49%	10%	6%	29%	6%
Central	42%	13%	7%	33%	5%
Southeast	24%	17%	15%	35%	10%
<b>Party Registration</b>					
Republican	49%	15%	12%	19%	6%
Democrat	35%	9%	11%	40%	5%
Independent	26%	8%	14%	40%	12%
Other	25%	0%	0%	63%	13%
<b>Fundamentalism</b>					
Less Fundamental	31%	14%	13%	34%	9%
Most Fundamental	60%	4%	10%	21%	6%
<b>Age</b>					
18-24	12%	12%	17%	48%	12%
25-34	20%	14%	22%	39%	5%
35-44	35%	18%	15%	26%	6%
45-54	46%	9%	9%	28%	9%
55-64	53%	4%	9%	23%	12%
Over 65	50%	13%	5%	26%	7%

Thirty-eight states have laws or constitutional provisions banning the marriage of same-sex couples. Pennsylvania is one of those 38 states. Governor Tom Ridge signed Pennsylvania's "defense of marriage" bill in 1996, just two weeks prior to that year's presidential election. The bills were easily passed by the General Assembly: 43 to five in the State Senate and 199 to two in the State House. Pennsylvania's law defines marriage as a civil contract by which one man and one woman take each other as husband and wife. The legislation also denies the validity of any other types of marriage performed outside of the state.

As the Pennsylvania legislature seems poised this spring to debate the nature of civil unions and marriage, there are clear political implications that can be drawn from the polling data. Among the electorate within the state, Republicans are mostly on one side and Democrats and Independents are on the other. But these issues also cut across regional and demographic lines--in ways that will surely produce fault lines within the legislative caucuses. The debate over the 1996 state law defining marriage took place in a very different political environment and with very little public debate. That certainly will not be the case this year. And as with other social and cultural issues--abortion and guns--the debate is likely to be contentious and bitterly fought.

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